Neurotypical blindness; proximity is paramount, but presence is absent

Benjamin James

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Neurotypical social cognition operates on the assumption that physical or conversational proximity signals interpersonal connection. When people share space, exchange words, or participate in familiar social forms, interaction is taken as proof of mutual engagement. But, proximity is not presence. Nearness can occur without attention, and synchronized behavior can unfold without genuine awareness of the other. This conflation produces a form of blindness where symbolic participation becomes indistinguishable from relational depth, and the appearance of connection obscures its absence.

For neurotypicals, proximity functions as a quick and efficient social heuristic. It reduces uncertainty, stabilizes expectations, and allows large groups to coordinate without needing to track one another deeply. Shared gestures, predictable conversational rhythms, and familiar emotional cues create the sense that engagement is occurring simply because recognizable patterns are being enacted. Over time, these patterns take on a life of their own. They become self-reinforcing signals that stand in for the interpersonal reality they were originally meant to express. The performance of connection replaces the experience of it.

Presence, by contrast, is not a matter of being near or participating in a ritualized exchange. It is an active, reciprocal process in which individuals direct genuine attention toward one another and adjust their internal understanding in response. Presence involves openness, interpretive flexibility, and a willingness to let the encounter reshape one's expectations. It demands cognitive and emotional effort, and it exposes participants to unpredictability. Because presence is costly in this way, social systems evolve to rely heavily on inexpensive signals that imitate connection without requiring the vulnerabilities real presence entails.

This reliance on symbolic markers becomes particularly visible when we contrast different cognitive orientations. Many neurodivergent individuals do not treat the usual social indicators of small talk, rapid emotional mirroring, and conventional gestures as reliable evidence of presence. They register the difference between coordinated behavior and actual

mutual awareness. When presence is missing, they feel it immediately and intensely, even when the interaction appears smooth on the surface. Conversely, when they offer presence through deep attention, careful processing, or sustained focus, their engagement often goes unnoticed or is misinterpreted simply because it does not conform to the outward cues the neurotypical system has learned to read.

This misalignment reveals the underlying blindness. Neurotypical social expectations are keyed to specific external markers, such as eye contact, quick responses, or certain tones of voice, which are taken as signs of engagement whether or not genuine attention is occurring. As a result, individuals who rely on deeper or less conventional modes of engagement are frequently judged as distant, disinterested, or withdrawn precisely when they are most attuned. What is experienced internally as real presence can look like absence to an observer conditioned to rely on surface cues. Meanwhile, those who replicate the expected signals are assumed to be engaged even when their attention is elsewhere.

The larger social consequences of this dynamic are significant. When proximity is mistaken for presence, relationships become dense but shallow. People interact frequently but understand one another poorly. Conversations multiply without generating insight. Emotional projection increases, because in the absence of mutual attention, assumptions fill the gaps. Social rituals become more elaborate to compensate for the lack of genuine connection, but the rituals themselves crowd out the space needed for real encounter. The culture begins to saturate itself with symbols of connection at the very moment those symbols obscure its absence.

In such an environment, neurodivergent modes of presence, often characterized by directness, precision, honesty, sensory grounding, or a slower tempo, can act as a corrective. They reveal the limits of neurotypical, proximity-based social cognition by insisting that presence requires more than spatial nearness or symbolic fluency. These modes highlight the difference between compliance with social expectations and genuine relational engagement. They show that attention can be deep without being adorned with conversational signs, and that connection can be real without conforming to standard rhythms.

This distinction has broader societal implications. It suggests that social life often mistakes the performance of interpersonal reality for the reality itself. Symbolic behaviors become proxies for experiences, and the proxies gradually detach from what they were meant to signify. People become skilled at navigating the symbols while losing the ability to inhabit the underlying relational states. The result is a form of collective self-deception; a world in which individuals feel surrounded by others yet rarely feel seen, a world full of conversation that rarely becomes communion.

Recognizing the difference between proximity and presence is therefore not simply a matter of interpersonal etiquette. It is a structural insight into how social cognition organizes itself. When proximity dominates, social life becomes efficient but impoverished. When presence is valued, social life becomes more uncertain but more meaningful. The challenge is learning to perceive the absence beneath the surface of nearness and to recognize forms of presence that do not match conventional scripts. Doing so requires recalibrating attention, widening interpretive expectations, and becoming sensitive to modes of engagement that operate outside standard symbolic patterns.

To distinguish proximity from presence is to understand why so many interactions feel hollow despite their frequency. It is to grasp why some people seem disengaged even when they are deeply attentive, and why others appear connected while contributing nothing to the relational field. It is to recognize that presence cannot be inferred from the choreography of social life but must be sensed through the quality of mutual attunement. Only by cultivating this discernment can social life move beyond the superficial comfort of proximity and into the deeper, riskier, and more transformative terrain of genuine interpersonal presence.

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